

SURVIVOR

Mass. Rifle Association: Oldest gun club in U.S.

Walnut Hill 1875-2000 The Early History of the MRA

By Robert Summa

Please join us in our adventures as we blaze the trail for the future. You will find an atmosphere of friendship and fun that engulfs the M.R.A. Participating in various shooting activities within the magic boundaries of the M.R.A.'s Walnut Hill will be a refreshing change from the hectic world. I thank you for being part of Walnut Hill history. You can feel the excitement in the air and the spirit of Walnut Hill today.

(Robert Summa is the president of the Massachusetts Rifle Association.)

East Woburn -

The Massachusetts Rifle Association in East Woburn was founded in 1875 in Woburn and is the oldest in existence in the United States. In 2000, they celebrated their 125th Anniversary.

Their facilities, nestled among the buildings of Cummings Properties to the east and the Aberjona River basin to the west, still thrives in the so-called Walnut Hill section of the city.

The goal of the club, noted President Robert Summa, is to promote the shooting sport for all members at their indoor and outdoor ranges. The 764 members pay \$100 a year to join.

By WILLIAM LOEB

It is rumored, and believed by many, that on certain windless nights when there is not even a single tiny breeze to deflect the perfect bullet fired from a perfect gun at the perfect target, there is a gathering of the ghostly greats who once, in life, walked through the doors of Walnut Hill and matched their skills to try to develop the perfect rifle, the perfect gun and to make the perfect score.

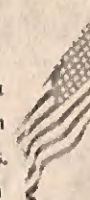
There is Harry Pope, whom some regard as the greatest barrel maker of all time. Joined by Adolph Neidner, ex-gunsmith, genius extraordinary, who did the pioneer work in developing a .22 high powered cartridge, which he tested on the range at Walnut Hill. There is Dr. Frank Mann, the Scientist and Ballistician, described as possibly without a peer in the science of ballistics. Another is E.E. Patridge, inventor of the partridge pistol sight most used today. Arthur Corbin Gould, a civilian firearms enthusiast, an early member of the Mass. Rifle Assoc., who in 1885 bought out the first issue of "The Rifle," the predecessor of the present "American Rifleman," the official publication of the National Rifle Association, is there also.

They talk of all they have learned since they left Walnut Hill forever and how now they have the answers to all the problems that they could never figure out while here below. They will solve many of those problems but there will be others still unsolved and that will be the challenge that will forever keep the present day members of the M.R.A. occupied in the eternal quest for perfection in the

Walnut Hill

September 26, 1891

President Nathaniel C. Nash giving his flag pole dedication speech to members and guests. You are witnessing history in the making.



art of rifle shooting. When dawn's early light begins to come, they depart quite happily because they know that all is still well with Walnut Hill, the oldest organized club of rifle shooters in the United States.

Founding fathers

The Mass. Rifle Assoc. was founded following a meeting in Boston at four o'clock in the afternoon of Nov. 4, 1875. The twenty shooting enthusiasts who gathered that afternoon probably never realized what they began on that Fall afternoon would become the most famous shooting club in the United States, and that it would endure for over 125 years. They were simply a group of gentlemen in days

MASS. RIFLE ASSOC. PAGE 15

*Congratulations on your
100th Anniversary*

WOBURN BUSINESS ASSOCIATION

10 Tower Office Park
Suite 416
Woburn, MA 01888

PAUL J. MEANEY



P.O. Box 3057
Woburn, MA 01888
Bus. 781-935-0345

Mass. Rifle Association

(From Page 14)

long ago, before the multiple diversions of our own, who wanted to gather together and enjoy the sport of seeing who was the best shot. Their first move was to select a site, and they settled on the present area in Woburn known as Walnut Hill. In those days, the Club's property was heavily wooded and was a relatively remote country site, reached only by what was known as a barge operated by the Club which brought members from the railroad station. The barge might be described as a horse-drawn bus where the members sat opposite each other in the board seats.

Yet, so great was the enthusiasm engendered by the new Club that often, on a weekend, there were as many as 400 shooters. So dedicated were they to the art of shooting that 14 short years later, the Mass. Volunteer Militia sent a Walnut Hill trained rifle team to Wimbledon where it won every match it could enter under the rules of the National Rifle Association of Great Britain. By 1890, a year later, Walnut Hill had actually become almost as well known as Creedmoor.

Since accomplishment in the field of shooting was the first object of the Club, the early concentration of the members, of course, evolved around the proper setting up of the ranges. As early as 1876, two targets were being provided at 200 and 300 yards, with 21 shooters participating. Targets of cast iron, made in sections and bolted together in the back, were used in early years were supplanted by steel in about 1880 when the change was made to the present system of paper targets.

The first targets at 500 and 600 yards were then erected on December 19, 1876, and the first 800, 900 and 1000 yards on April 17, 1877.

No shelter

Until the Fall of 1878, there was no shelter at all for the shooters at any firing point except a portable canvas awning which was moved from one position to another as required. Then, the first more substantial protection for the hunters was a so-called Winter shed, which was erected at the 200 yard firing line.

The present clubhouse was erected in the Summer of 1891 while Nathaniel C. Nash was President and a 50 and 25 yard pistol range were added shortly thereafter. Nathaniel Cushing Nash, President from 1891 to 1892, was the father of Nathaniel Cushing Nash, former President of the National Rifle Association from Marblehead and now the Massachusetts Rifle Association's only Life Member.

The 1,000 yard range fell into disuse quite a good many years ago, and the land on which it once ran is now crossed by Route 128, the circumferential highway running from north to southwest of Boston. Shooting was continued up to 500 yards at Walnut Hill until 1948. In that year, a nearly spent bullet entered a house that was located on an extension of the 500 yard range. An injunction was filed against the Mass. Rifle Assoc. which prohibited shooting other than with a .22 rifle on the Walnut Hill Range. The Association proved conclusively that the bullet could not have been fired from Walnut Hill Range, and in

1950, the injunction was lifted and the Club resumed high power shooting, but only taking proper and adequate safe guards to make it impossible for a bullet fired at a target in the normal manner from the firing line to leave the range. Among other safeguards are the restricting of high power rifle fire at 200 yards and also erecting a safety barrier immediately in front of the firing line.

In recent years, extensive renovations have been carried out for the repair, repainting and refurbishing of the clubhouse as well as improvements on the ranges. This also included, the trap range, which now has two automatic target throwing machines, sporting clays and action shooting.

One of the innovations developed at Walnut Hill was bench rest shooting. This became popular at Walnut Hill around 1885. When it was first suggested by one of the members, he was ridiculed by his fellow members because they said that anyone with a rest could shoot into the bullseye all day long and with little or no skill. However, their first match soon exploded that theory. They quickly learned that it took more than a tyro to place the ten consecutive shots within the 8-inch bullseye, bench rest or no bench rest. The early rests they shot from were quite primitive, being nothing more than a plank arranged at a proper angle and the shooter seated on the camp stool by its side.

First perfect score

Early accounts say that the shooter making the first perfect score on the standard American target at 200 yards was D.L.F. Chase on June 5, 1886.

Yet, Walnut Hill reflects not only the limitations of ballistics and mechanics of that day, but also the more leisurely tempo of the times. It is hard to visualize in this age of simply slipping a cartridge into the breech of a rifle the amount of time and effort required by the early day shooters, who up until almost World War I, of course, used muzzle loaders.

After each shot, the shooter took a Fisher brush which was dipped in a jar of water and then pushed it through the bore. This brush had a bristle top with a series of rubber disks behind it. Then red, blue and white, one or two white patches were pushed through the barrel on a double slotted ramrod, one after the other, to clean and dry the bore for the next shot. In spite of this long procedure, which also included the actual loading process, the shooters were able to get off as many as 100 shots in two and a half or three hours. Today, many shooters must get their shooting done in an hour and a half to fulfill their many other obligations.

In loading these rifles, extreme care was taken, which seemed to have been one of the secrets of the fine groups that were shot. Some members had false muzzles on their rifles, like those on the old percussion match rifles, and seated the bullet from the muzzle. Others breechseated the bullet with a special tool, the bullet being seated in the bore 1/16" to 1/32" ahead of the mouth of the case.

They weighed all their bullets, powder charges and primers. Some of them used lubricated bullets, and some used bullets with a Chase paper patch which was set up by D.L.F. Chase and went once around the bullet. The Chase patch dropped off when the bullet left the muzzle of the rifle, and it was an improvement over the Sharps patch paper which sometimes caused a wild shot by failing to drop

off the bullet. Those old time shooters who used the Sharps patch would often slit them up the side with a sharp knife before seating them in the bore. Those paper

patches were shot dry, not oiled, like the cross paper patches used by percussion match rifle shooters. A few hundred shots with dry patches would polish the bore of a rifle like glass.

It was in the years shortly after the turn of the century that Adolph Neider, Harry Pope, and Dr. Mann did some of their most fascinating work at Walnut Hill. It was in those years when Neider was shooting at Walnut Hill that he became annoyed with the poor accuracy of the .22 long cartridge. He also did some interesting experiments with barrels. He found, for instance, that the 7-1/2 inch barrel will give all there is in a .22 long cartridge. But, of course, he realized the barrel was so short it wouldn't make a rifle that could be shot prone or offhand, so he finally settled on a 15-inch barrel which was the shortest he could use and still shoot prone.

Neidner tells the amusing story of those days when he points out that all the offhand shots had a habit of calling their shots and could do it pretty accurately most of the time. He mentioned our Life Member, Col. Nathaniel Cushing Nash, as a young man coming out to Walnut Hill Range with his father. According to Neidner, Nash was watching Neidner shoot a .32-40 Ballard at 200 yards one day. Neidner was calling the shots. Our Life Member watched for a while and then is alleged to have said, "Why, you can do it every time." Neidner said, "Oh yes; I am willing to bet a dollar I can call ten shots correctly as I fire them."

Nash bit, so Neider loaded the Ballard and fired into the backstop and said, "That's a miss." Nash looked puzzled and didn't say anything, so Neidner loaded again and fired twice more into the back-stop, each time saying, "That's a miss." After the third shot, Nash caught on and realized that he had been "taken" and that he had bet after all that Neider couldn't call the shots accurately every time. As Neidner said, it was just a joke and wouldn't take Nash's money.

"The Bullet's Flight"

Dr. Franklin W. Mann wrote his famous book on ballistics, "The Bullet's Flight's in those early days when he was shooting at Walnut Hill. Dr. Mann, as a physicist and also a great expert on ballistics, of course, was a tremendous help as advisor to Neidner and Pope. He was also an extremely generous individual with the Club itself. On one occasion, Dr. Mann gave a Pope machine rest to the Mass. Rifle Assoc. and had it installed at Walnut Hill in a concrete base where it was there for any of the members to use.

Also, Harry Pope, considered by many to have been the world's greatest rifle barrel maker, shot often and did much of his experimental work at Walnut Hill where he could exchange views with Dr. Mann and Adolph Neidner. Pope had quite a sense of humor. He tacked up on the wall of his dimly lit shop a target with a big black bullseye. In the exact center of the target was a tiny group of shots all in one hole. On the margin of the target, he marked 600 with two little dots meaning inches. The hair of any customer

eventually spotting the target would almost stand on end at the sight of such accuracy at 600 yards. Thereupon, the

following dialogue often occurred. "My God, was this done with one of your barrels? Pope, "Why yes." Customer, "Well, it must be a world record at this distance." Pope, "Why, sir, I believe it is." Pope would then carefully point out to the non-observant customer that the ditto marks in

Mass. Rifle Association

(From Page 15)

icated that this was 600 inches, not 600 yards. With this innocent little trick, he tripped up many a shooter and conveyed a valuable lesson that common sense always prevails in rifle shooting as everywhere else. As a result, one should not allow his reason to be upset by the sight of accuracy that is not justified by experience.

Of course, when evaluating the work of these pioneers in barrel and bullet making who attempted to improve the accuracy of U.S. rifles, we must remember that these men worked without the scientific marvels of our modern machine age. While much of what they did was unbelievably fine work, they were handicapped by lack of tools and even lack of certain steel now available. This makes their accomplishments all the greater.

Revolver shooting was also very strong in the early days. One of the earliest important pistol matches on record was shot at Walnut Hill in the Fall of 1886. This match drew professional shooter Chevalier Paine, in addition to amateur entrants. Chevalier Paine shot 148 out of a possible 150 with his closest competitor scoring 142. Of Chevalier Paine, our Honorary Life Member, Mr. Nathaniel Cushing Nash writes, "It is my recollection he wasn't a very constant attendant, but I do recollect a story about him. It went something like this.

He lived on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, and for some reason, I don't know whether he found a robber in his home or discovered another man making advances to his wife, but anyway he pulled a gun on him and ordered him out onto the tree-lined park which goes along the center of Commonwealth Avenue and told him to run.

When the intruder began running, our Walnut Hill shooter began shooting at the ground on each side of the man's running feet. When the man sued him for assault, Mr. Paine had no trouble getting friends to testify that he was such a skilled shot, the bullets did not hit the man, that it was Paine's intention to only scare him." So pistol practice at Walnut Hill evidently had other benefits to it than just for skill on the range! Almost the most interesting aspect of the Mass. Rifle Assoc. has been its capacity for survival. History is littered with the glories that were Greece and the grandeur's that were Rome. Likewise, history of shooting organizations which flared up momentarily and had their happy and sunny days then faded away completely from the shooting scene.

Still thriving

Whether it was the dedication 125 years ago of the founders of the Mass. Rifle Assoc. or whether there is something in the air at Walnut Hill, the Club has continued to thrive and prosper in an age that is not friendly to guns or rifle shooting and at a time when urban and suburban sprawl has closed in on it. Under the leadership of President Robert Summa, the Club has not only been refur-

bished inside and out, but it today carries on a vigorous program of matches in high power as well as small bore and also on the trap, sporting clays and action shooting.

Walnut Hill also has not only an eye for the past, but the future. The future is pretty well provided for by the fact that the M.R.A. has an excellent program for the juniors, both boys and girls, with a full course of instruction each year. This will provide the Club with many younger members of hunters and good shooters in the years to come.

Yet, probably the founding fathers of Walnut Hill would be proudest of the atmosphere that surrounds the Club. The membership is dedicated not only to the finest aspects of the shooting sports, but to gentlemanly and womanly friendly behavior. Visitors to the Club often remark on the atmosphere of quiet friendship and fun that seems to engulf the entire organization, where a morning or afternoon of shooting can be a complete refresher away from the hectic and confused world outside of the magic boundaries of Walnut Hill.

(William Loeb was one of the founders and long-time member who wrote the early history. The piece was updated for the 125th anniversary through the efforts of President Robert Summa and coordinated for the 100th Daily Times Chronicle's 100th Anniversary Edition by Woburn resident Maureen Trickett, a librarian at Woburn High School.)